

PERSPECTIVES ON PRESERVING INDEPENDENTLY PRODUCED VIDEOTAPES

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For the July-August 1981 issue of *American Film*, Amy Greenfield wrote an article about the problems facing archivists who are working to preserve videotapes. Because of space limitations, only part of her research on the special problems confronting independent video-makers appeared in the article. The following paragraphs summarize her interviews with David Ross, Barbara London, Nam June Paik, John Hanhardt, Davidson Gigliotti, and Ralph Hocking. Common themes emerged from all the discussions: 1) early format tapes are endangered by the physical decay of the tape materials and by the breakdown and obsolescence of the videotape recorders on which they were made; 2) tapes made now seem to be equally threatened by incompatible formats and decay; 3) recognition of the gravity of these problems is lacking -- by both the industry and the funding community! 4) if steps are not taken quickly, most of the surviving videotapes from the late 1960s and early 1970s will be lost. [Anthology Film Archives' video preservation program, which began functioning in 1983, addresses all of these concerns.]

Now at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, David Ross established the video collections of the Everson Museum, the Long Beach Museum of Art, and the University Art Museum in Berkeley. Ross says that the principal problem in preserving video is public awareness of video art. There is too little recognition of the cultural contributions of video, too little awareness of its potential for coming generations. Ross points to the existence of the film preservation program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and the absence of one for videotapes. The National Endowment for the Humanities has been funding the archiving of television news through grants to the Vanderbilt University News Library. But there has been no comparable funding of video art. Ross fears that only the tragic deterioration of a "masterpiece" or the loss of invaluable art documentation will stimulate enough awareness to focus energy, time, and funds on the archival preservation of video art (tapes and installations).

Ross is particularly concerned that even if stable videotape materials are developed, independently produced video works may be over-looked by a broadcast-television focused preservation program. Early broadcast television programs have been copied onto the stable medium of two-inch videotape. Ross ironically noted that, compared to the half-inch tape used by independents, this two-inch tape is almost archival! Half-inch tapes by independents require rerecording and preserving.

Ross concluded with the observation that thousands of hours of alternative video are scattered around the country, almost none of it properly stored, [in the 1970s Ross had been involved in an attempt, unsuccessful, to set up a national storage/study center for video.] Even if an archival preservation facility for video is created, Ross fears that the selection criteria could be too narrow. It would be premature, he feels, for such historically important decisions to be made at this time.

Barbara London of the Museum of Modern Art recognizes the existence of the problem and the lack of funds to deal with it. She hopes that the development of videodisc technology will provide the ultimate solution. In the meantime, so that MoMA can play early half-inch videotapes, the museum has rerecorded selected works onto one-inch videotape. London shares with Ross a concern for adequate funding and the need for preservation space.

Nam June Paik believes that issues affecting the preservation of video works can be grouped into three areas: technological, economic and aesthetic. He speaks as an artist, but also as one who has worked in video for a period longer than any other artist or administrator.

Technological: half-inch reel to reel port-able equipment made before 1974 possesses the most urgent problems. The equipment, and tapes made on the different decks — especially CV and AV tapes, require preservation. Some of this early work, Paik says, is already beyond rerecording, even with excellent time base correctors. Eventually, he hopes, digital systems may permit the reconstitution of some of this work. Paik feels a national equipment center should be established, with a full-time engineer, to play back and record old videotapes. Paik also feels a federally funded storage center for these videotapes is a necessity: with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and nominal fees to the tape-makers, an irreplaceable body of achievement could be saved.

Economic: because most of the money available for video is located in broadcast television, independents who are not concerned with broadcasting are in an economic trap. The struggle to find funding for works-in-progress usually leads to the neglect of completed tapes. In the late 1960s many tapes were recycled; old signals were erased, and the videotape reused for the video-maker's current project, and the earlier works lost forever. One response to this, Paik feels — as to Ross, London, Hanhardt, Hocking and Gigliotti — is to insist that the preservation of independents' work be discussed at every forum where broadcast television preservation is discussed. The two forms, so closely related, should not be allowed to disconnect, economically or aesthetically.

Aesthetic: preservation must address the whole spectrum of video art. Individual artists, since the 1960s, have been appropriating the instruments of television to create tapes that oppose or stand apart from the uniformity of broadcast television. Complexly edited tapes, color synthesized tapes, live video performances, video installations, and video sculpture are all examples of how video can be used in ways unknown to the great majority of television spectators. Preservation must address not only the tapes, but also the installation concepts of multi-channel and/or inter-active live-video performances. (John Hanhardt, who has demonstrated a continuing commitment to presenting multi-channel video at the Whitney Museum of American Art, is especially concerned with the question of preserving these pieces. Should the artist who owns them be responsible, or the museum which has shown it? Precedents for such questions may be more easily found in the theater than in art museums.)

Preservation must also focus on another kind of video — that produced by community based groups which pooled equipment. Often living and working together in communes, they used

the instrument to record political events, to interview all sorts of persons who could be reached with a portapak. This form of video, which defined and helped to create alternative life styles in the 1960s and 1970s, usually exists only as original, unedited tape. Videofreex, for instance, has about 600 hours of videotape stored in upstate New York — in a farmhouse, not in an archival environment.

Paik looks out on this great array of applications of video — a development he was deeply involved in -- and expresses the belief that only about a hundred can be considered works of art. To protect them, he feels, it is necessary for many more tapes to be made. Only when more work of the highest quality is produced will larger resources be directed to preserving the whole of the body of work produced by independent video-makers. Two video-makers who have been addressing these questions (and who sit on the Video Preservation Committee at Anthology) are Ralph Hocking and Davidson Gigliotti. Gigliotti has been researching the history of video in the 1960s, and has also been studying the technological details of restoring and replaying half-inch videotape. These two subjects are inextricably linked: the electronic mirror of video, hidden in the decaying tapes, can help reveal who made them, as well as what was made. Gigliotti is at work on a historical study and technical papers (in 1984 Anthology will publish the historical essay in the next number of this publication). Like Paik, he feels that digital video is the long-term hope for video preservation.

Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller run the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York. Hocking and Miller are video artists who have worked with half-inch video since the CV period. With time base correctors, and a hardware preservation program, they have set up on a small scale the equipment center that Paik had proposed. Hocking is especially concerned with early color formats, believing them to be just as fragile as CV. The Experimental Television Center has no facility for archival tape storage. Hocking agrees with Ross, and Paik, and all the others that a national center for the preservation of independently produced video is a necessity.

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Thanks to Anthology Film Archives <http://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org/>